



Doorstep Library

tips for engaging shy children during reading sessions

Whether online or in-person, some children might find reading aloud and interacting with new adults quite difficult and daunting. Family life and the home environment can be a very busy and buzzing place. At times, it can be tricky for a child to speak up and take the space they need to express themselves. This might be true especially for particularly shy children.

Here you can find a few things to consider which might help a shy child feel comfortable and at ease during the sessions.



Allow space

It is incredibly important that shy children are given the time to warm up to your presence, and to the idea of reading together. Never pressure them to read, rather, ask them what they would like to do, whether they would perhaps like to be read to initially or even just have a bit of a chat about their interests. While you might give suggestions, try not to answer questions for them, so that the child is given the opportunity to slowly come out of their shell over time. You might naturally hold off the direct questioning with really quiet children though - and just make observations, until they start joining in.

With very shy children it can take you a while to get a true sense of what level their reading and comprehension is, and hence find the things to look at that they're comfortable with. So gentle patience is important and offers a range of different types of books. Also, it can take a few weeks or even longer for shy and wary children to get used to this new and different activity, and that's fine. Just let them go at their own pace.



Listen and take notice

A shy child sharing details with you about something they enjoy is gold dust! Listen, and try to follow up if possible. See if you can find the book title they were asking for or a factual read that reflects their interests. It does not have to be necessarily related to the reading though! Remembering to ask how their school trip went, or whether they had a good birthday is just as important, and will help you build a positive relationship where the child feels valued and more confident about opening up and expressing their thoughts.



Setting routines

Using a similar technique to start and end the visit each time is an ideal way to engage shy children and make them feel comfortable. For younger children, this could be using a game to choose a book, or perhaps singing a song together! If they are reluctant to get stuck in, getting them to turn the pages is also a great idea.

For older children, coming prepared with specific conversation starters might be helpful. You could ask, for example, 'how was your week? How was school?' At the end of the session, having a similar technique might help wrap up and avoid shy children feeling a bit stressed about how to say goodbye. You could also chat about the last chapter you read and try guessing together what might happen next.



Taking turns reading aloud

Shy children or children who are not too confident with their reading might easily feel nervous about reading aloud in front of adults. Remember you always can read to the children if they would prefer that, and get them to engage in the session by asking them questions about the themes or characters in the book. You could then try reading a page each and gradually increase the amount the child reads to you.



Using puppets and other objects

This is a particularly good strategy if reading with a child online, as you could prepare some objects that you already have at home in advance of your session. This can really help bridge the gap between you and a shy child when reading online. Speaking to a puppet or object can feel easier and less pressured for children. If you don't have anything to hand, a regular sock can be turned into a talking puppet – or you could even draw a face on a fruit!

If you're visiting families in person, you can ask your Team Leader to borrow a story sack, which is particularly good for engaging babies and toddlers. Story sacks will usually include items that you can use for storytelling and play fun games. Inside, you can often find puppets that go together with a specific book, scarves to play peek-a-boo, a musical instrument to help with singing and rhymes, and an object which supports the development of motor skills e.g. a ball.

For a child who easily engages with books story sacks might not be needed, but if they are a bit reluctant or shy singing and playing together can go a long way in terms of warming up the atmosphere for storytelling. And if the parent would like to get involved too, all the better!